

RICHARD STEWART
Gumbo Shop – New Orleans, LA

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Date: September 17, 2008
Location: New Orleans, Louisiana
Interviewer: Sara Roahen, Southern Foodways Alliance
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 1 hour 14 minutes
Project: Southern Gumbo Trail – Louisiana

[Begin Richard Stewart Interview]

00:00:00

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Wednesday, September 17, 2008. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, with Chef Richard Stewart. If I could get you to say your name and your birth date and tell me your profession, we'll get started.

00:00:17

Richard Stewart: I'm Richard Stewart. I was born on December 2, 1953. And I am a restaurateur, and I like to think of myself as a cookbook author now also.

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SR: I would say that fits. Can you—I mean I'm here to talk about gumbo, of course, for obvious reasons, or reasons that will become obvious, but could you start by telling me where you grew up and where you had your beginnings?

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RS: I grew up in New Orleans not far from where we are right now in the University section of New Orleans. And my beginning as far as—?

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SR: That's mostly—your childhood, I guess, I want to know. What about—what about your family heritage?

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RS: On one side of the family I think I'm the fifth generation New Orleanian. My, I believe it's great, great, great-grandfather has this big tomb in the Metairie Cemetery. Matthew O'Brian is his name, but yeah. I have several generations on my mother's side in the city.

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SR: And are they of a—did they come from Europe, or do you know that far back?

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RS: They came—yeah, my heritage is all English, Irish, Scottish, so they came from that area [*Laughs*], and I believe they settled first in the Maryland area and then came down here. My father's family was from Kentucky, and then Opelousas and Ocean Springs, Mississippi.

00:01:53

SR: Okay. How did you get into the food business?

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RS: I just liked to cook. Ever since I was pre-teen I always had an interest in food, and I remember when my mother first got the *Joy of Cooking*, I remember reading almost the whole book and reading—I particularly liked the sections on *Know Your Ingredients*, which talked-- illustrated how everything worked together: what, you know what an egg does, and what flour does, and all that. And I found that very helpful, like throughout my cooking career. And I would

just read cookbooks and cook things or watch my mother cook things, and I would watch my mother cook things, and--and I liked doing it. And then when I was in college, I wasn't working in a restaurant. I was a house painter and I was in business school after switching majors several times, and then the business school opened a school of hotel and restaurant administration and so I switched into that and started working at restaurants, and I just kind of went on from there.

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SR: Where did you go to college?

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RS: At UNO in New Orleans. [*Laughs*]

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SR: And was your mom a particularly good cook, or did you have—was cooking and eating a big part of your life growing up?

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RS: Yeah, we always had--we always had a big dinner and my mother cooked dinner every night. We ate out sometimes, but you know we--she cooked every night, and a lot of traditional New Orleans foods: gumbo, grillades she would cook a lot, red beans and rice, that sort of thing, and lots of like stewed okra dishes—and she would call them gumbo. But it would be, say like a stewed okra with chunks of veal stew meat in it or something, and she would call it veal gumbo. And it was always dry; you'd serve it over rice on a plate, not in a bowl.

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SR: Well that's interesting because of the etymology of the word *okra*; the connection between the words--word *okra* and the word *gumbo*.

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RS: Right.

00:04:02

SR: Sort of old-school definition.

00:04:04

RS: Right, just referring to okra as gumbo, right. And yeah, she'd do something with chunks of sausage in it or--or chicken or whatever. And then in the summer she would always make a more soupy gumbo and she would do it without a roux and just brown all of her onions and bell pepper and that sort of thing, and then add a lot of okra and shrimp and tomatoes and crab and sometimes oysters. And other than the oysters everything was in the peak of their season at that time, so that would be our summer gumbo. And that's how I—that was my impression of gumbo. It wasn't until [I was] much older that I had gumbo with roux in it, which she referred to as *that old gravy gumbo*. **[Laughs]**

00:04:55

SR: That’s good. And so would she—just out of curiosity because I recently had to sort of forfeit a bunch of frozen okra when the hurricane came. Would your mom freeze okra during the summer or would she buy frozen okra for her--for those gumbo dishes?

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RS: In the summer she would use fresh okra and in the winter she would buy frozen okra. Maybe she froze some sometimes but I don't know.

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SR: And would you say that if there was, like, an influential cook in your life as a young person, would it have been her or would it have been someone else?

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RS: Probably her. You know, initially, and then I remember when I was in high school I had a good friend who lived with his sister and brother-in-law in a--in a house in the French Quarter. I used to—you know that was a cool place to hang out [*Laughs*], so I used to stay there a lot and his sister was very into cooking. And so she was sort of an influence, too.

00:05:59

SR: So you had a high school friend who didn’t live with his parents?

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RS: Yeah, yeah, and in the French Quarter. Yeah, it was great. *[Laughs]* And his--his brother-in-law was a comedian and actor. *[Laughs]*

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SR: That would be good. Do you remember if they ever made gumbo?

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RS: I don't remember. I remember she used to make jambalaya a lot and she was—and that was something my mother didn't make, and so that was something different for me. And but it was unusual the way she made it because she used—instead of like smoked sausage sliced up, she used these tiny little link sausages, and they were like some kind of little beanie-weenie kind of *[Laughs]*, some kind of packaged sausage. It was strange. That and--and chicken and shrimp or something, but—. That was my first jambalaya experience.

00:06:51

SR: It's funny that you could live in this town your whole life and not have roux gumbo for a long time or not have—I guess maybe—.

00:07:00

RS: Yeah, well I think--I think that gumbo without roux was more typically New Orleanian than—I think of more Cajun as being roux-heavy.

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SR: I guess two—that makes me think of two questions. The first would be: Did your family identify as Creole at all?

00:07:15

RS: No. No, just as New Orleanians I guess. I remember another thing while I'm thinking of it: she talked about her mother, who grew up in the Uptown area too, making what she called gumbo choux, which I think was made from cabbage. And she did—my mother would make rouxs for other things and she said—and she remembered her mother making things like making a little roux and--and I guess putting some seasoning in it and then cooking, like, fresh string beans in it and serving it over rice. And they—it was a similar thing she would do with cabbage, and that's what she called gumbo choux.

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SR: Do you—did you ever eat gumbo choux?

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RS: No, I've tried to make it. Well I haven't tried to make it but I thought about making it from her description of it. [*Laughs*] I've made the green beans like that and it's very good.

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SR: And then my other question was: Did you eat out much growing up?

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RS: Not a whole lot. I mean back then New Orleans was a—you probably heard that about New Orleans: *It's a city with 1,000 restaurants and one menu*, and it used to be very much so like that. I remember we used to eat at places, like, there were lots of little corner restaurants that were Italian and fried seafood like Casamento's, Compagno's—there were like three of those around town. We used to eat at places like that sometimes. We used to go to this place called Wholesome Cafeteria [**Laughs**] that was in the CBD, and it was very elegant and it was a cafeteria. I remember I had an old aunt who would take me there sometimes; she worked in the CBD. And they had waiters who would wear like white cloths over their arms and come around with silver pitchers pouring coffee to people and that sort of thing. But--and it was very New Orleans food. I remember eating shrimp Creole there or something, and I remember these little caramel custards that they'd bring you it in a cup. It was one of my favorites as--as a kid. [**Laughs**] And for—sometimes for events we would eat at--I remember eating at Commander's [Palace]; that was like kind of a big deal. Where else did we eat? Sometimes we'd just go to the po-boy shops like Domilise's, even back then. But it--it was more home food.

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SR: What about, where did you work in the city before you became a business owner?

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RS: I worked—let's see, I think my first--my first restaurant job was a little place called The Charcoal House, and it was a hamburger joint two blocks from my house where I grew up, and that was just hamburgers and that sort of thing. And they had pinball machines there, so that was a fun place to hang out at the time. And then I think my second—I worked at a place called

Danté by the River, which is now Brigtsen's, the same building, and this would have been I think back in the '70s. And it was a nice little—well it was the same layout as--as Brightson's is now, an old house converted into a restaurant and—. Oh before I worked there I worked at a crêpe shop in the French Quarter yeah called the Carriage Café on St. Anne Street between Charters and Royal, and that was a little front kitchen, exposed kitchen, and a very lovely little tiled dining room, and it was an all-crêpe menu and we would—it was a little tiny kitchen in the backroom and we would make crêpes in the morning. And I remember the--that was the--the low man on the totem pole job was to make the crêpes every morning. I used to have to make big stacks of crêpes, and then in the front kitchen you'd just make the filling and roll them up and serve them. And I'll remember the recipe the rest of my life. It was--you'd make it in a blender and it was a cup of milk, a cup of water, a cup of flour, four eggs, and about a teaspoon of melted butter, and you'd blend it up [*Laughs*], and I still remember that. And we would put four pans, little six-inch pans on a--on the stove, and we'd have a thing of melted butter and you'd turn them on high and you'd go butter, butter, butter, batter, batter, batter, flip, flip, flip, and you couldn't stop. [*Laughs*] You'd lose your rhythm and it would burn or not cook, and we'd make this huge stack of crêpes.

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And then we had fillings. I remember one filling was unusual and very good, and you would use about a pound of butter and maybe five big onions and cut the onions and slowly cook them until they're really caramelized and then add a gallon of drained oysters, and it was delicious. It was called Crêpes Nicole or something—something the owner of the place invented. But that was really unusual and very good. And there was some with crawfish and shrimp and asparagus, and it was a nice little place.

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SR: It seems like that should still exist.

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RS: Yeah, it's--now it's a--I think another guest room of the Place D'Armes. So that was a--that was a fun job. I think after that it was Dante By the River. Iler Pope was the owner of that, who later had Café Atchafalaya, and she was a character. *[Laughs]* I'll tell you, I could tell you some stories of that but I don't think they should be recorded. *[Laughs]*

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SR: If there's anything we can record I'd love to hear it because she sounded like a character.

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RS: Um—

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SR: She recently passed away, I think, right?

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RS: I heard that, yeah--yeah.

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SR: Was Dante By the River similar to Café Atchafalaya, sort of a Southern—?

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RS: It was more Southern than—yeah, yeah, not as New Orleans or Cajun. I think he has a lot of Cajun influence, but it was—she was from Delta country in Mississippi, as was her partner in it. All the stories about her involve profanity so **[Laughs]** —.

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SR: All right. **[Laughs]** What about, did you--did you all make a gumbo there?

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RS: I don't think we did. We made--I remember we made more like cream soups and things like that, and there were veal dishes, like you know, baby veal dishes, and I don't remember a lot of the menu there—some steaks, and I remember like the--maybe like steak au poivre or something like that. I don't remember a whole lot of the food there for some reason, **[Laughs]** but it was fairly elegant, a lot of—ladies' lunch-type of place, and fancy salads and things like that, and I think we did some crêpes there; pasta, yeah—and we made fresh pasta there and that kind of stuff.

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SR: And so, I mean you own—let me just ask one question before I forget. What is--what is or was your mother's name?

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RS: Oh, her name was Mary Alice Stewart, and she went by the name of Toots for some reason. And Burn was her maiden name. Mary Alice Burn was her maiden name.

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SR: Okay. So you—I think that you own the restaurant with the most sort of iconic name in all of New Orleans: the Gumbo Shop.

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RS: Yeah, I've heard Tom Fitzmorris [a New Orleans food media personality] say that. And I'm *one of* the owners. There's another owner. I--I actually went to work there when I was in college for a while, and I think that was when—I remember my mother saying—let me think, I wasn't working there at the time...I think when I was hanging out with my friends who lived in the French Quarter, I went and ate there one time and at that time it was this little mom-and-pop place owned by a woman named Margaret Papora. It was called—and it had, on the sign, I think Papora's Gumbo Shop. And I remember telling my mother I ate there and that's what she said: *Oh yeah, they have that gravy gumbo there.* [**Laughs**] And I remember it was dark, and--and you know it was just like a little joint. But Margaret Papora was married to Earl Long's secretary, the governor, and this was her little business. I heard—I didn't witness it, but I heard that every night at the end she would just take the cash register and dump it into her purse and leave. [**Laughs**] So then it—that was purchased by Bill Roberts in 1977, and I think it was--it must have been right around then that I just went and worked there as a waiter/bartender when I was in college and then left and did—I think after that I went to Dante By the River. And then he [Bill Roberts]

wanted to do an off-site kitchen because space is so valuable in the French Quarter, and all of the--most of the food served there lended itself to advance preparation: red beans and gumbos, New Orleans pot food, you know. And so he wanted to do an off-site kitchen so he could have more seating space there. And he asked me to open the off-site kitchen, which I did at some—I don't know what year, but—. And then just one thing evolved into the other, so I own part of it now with him.

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SR: Oh, and I guess there are a few questions. So you knew him because you had worked there as a waiter but—

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RS: Right.

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SR: —you also had—he knew you had this cooking experience?

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RS: Yeah, and I was in college with his cousin which is my age, and she was in the same program, I think—the restaurant and hotel program that I was—and it was a professor there who must have recommended me to him or something. But I remember when I worked there we got along and—. But so, yeah, that's how it all just happened.

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SR: And you don't remember what year that was, but you—was it in the '80s or—?

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RS: No, I think it was maybe '79. Something like that, yeah.

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SR: And where is or was that off-site kitchen?

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RS: It was a little place we rented on Tchoupitoulas Street down around Felicity. It was a building there and this was—it used to be the cafeteria for the building and we just put in a big kettle. I think we started with a 60-gallon kettle, and we'd just make all the gumbo there and make everything—and salad dressings and anything we could make in advance we would make there and just bring it down to the restaurant every day or every other day, you know. Red beans always taste better the next day so it--it was good for that.

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And then it was in the early 1980s that we—yeah, too, at the same time we opened a restaurant on Prytania Street that is now—what is the name of it?—La Thai. It's--it was actually next door to that. Where La Thai is was a doctor's office. And the very back dining room was—you'd go through like a hallway, and then it was a dining room back there and a bar, a nice-looking restaurant. At one time it was--it was Kevin Vizzard's restaurant with Parker--Parker

Murphy, but that—this is like another story [*Laughs*]. But I think—no, no, we--we sold it to him. But I'm getting off-track now.

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SR: Was that—

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RS: At the same time we opened that restaurant in the early '80s we opened—we opened the restaurant first and then we bought some land and built the commissary that was much more suited for us. We had two restaurants, and so we--we started using the Cryovac system. Do you know what that is? It was just—we had a 125-gallon kettle then and you would—when the food was done you'd pump it into a one-gallon Cryovac bag and seal it. And it was hot, 180 degrees, and you'd drop it into this chill tank which was at 33 degrees, and it would rapidly chill it and keep it from cooking anymore and it would give it a shelf-life then without any--having any preservatives or anything like that. Just refrigerate it; you wouldn't have to freeze it or--or preserve it or anything. And then you could just bring it down to the restaurant and heat it and serve it, so it was consistent—always consistent and very cost-effective 'cause you're cooking 125 gallons at a time.

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SR: And is that how you still do it?

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RS: Uh-hm.

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SR: How long—what is the shelf-life of a Cryovac—?

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RS: Usually about 30 days, though we don't keep it that long. We turn it over so fast, but you know we had it tested in a lab one time and did shelf-life studies. The shortest one was red beans. It lasted like 30 days and the other things lasted longer.

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SR: I wonder why?

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RS: I don't know. I don't know.

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SR: So you're talking just refrigerated and not frozen?

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RS: Yeah, right, right. And we do, we freeze it. People order it and we ship, you know, around the country, and we freeze it for that 'cause consumers are more comfortable with it being frozen

when you ship it. The other thing we did there at that time was we invented a roux machine and we--we converted a—it was a 60-gallon steam jacketed kettle. You know what is?

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SR: Can you describe it just for the record?

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RS: It's--it's a big stainless steel—and I don't guess my hand motions mean much here *[Laughs]* but—and there's a jacket of stainless steel around about half of it, the bottom half, and this--this one was an electric one. So there are electric elements in that jacket and there's some water in it, and the electric elements will heat the water and create steam that was trapped in this jacket around the kettle. So it functioned like a double-boiler but a little bit hotter because it was steam rather than just boiling water. And it was a nice way to cook soups and things because it wouldn't stick and it was a very even heat. But--and that's--that's how we do the gumbos and everything now. But you couldn't make roux in it because it didn't get hot enough to brown the flour. If you put oil in it, it would just--it would get to maybe 300 degrees, but it wasn't enough to brown the flour. So what we did was remove the water from the jacket and added oil and worried about the thing exploding, but it worked *[Laughs]*. And we had--we had an engineer or someone there who kind of knew what they were doing to help us and we had a little release valve and an overflow thing so it wouldn't explode, and it worked. And the--the kettle had a full surface sweep stirrer, which was a big—like I guess if you can imagine, like almost like a wire whip, but it had these blades on it that would scrape every inch of the surface of the kettle, so that nothing would stick or burn, and that would—that was automatic. It would be turning the

entire time the roux was cooking, and so we could put in—we'd use 20 gallons of oil and 200 pounds of flour and dump it in there and turn it on and we would time it. And we also had a thermometer into it, and so we'd have consistent roux all the time. Never burned. And we had two—we called—one was a 325-degree roux, and then a 350-degree roux, and that was the finished temperature. When the thermometer read 325, it was sort of a café-au-lait kind of color, and we would use that for, like, étouffée and shrimp Creole. And then we'd use the darker one for the gumbos.

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SR: Do you think that you could copy that at home, the temperature thing?

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RS: You mean making it on the pot—in a pot on the stove?

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SR: Yeah.

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RS: I don't know. It's a different—, I've--I've found out so many things about roux that I didn't know just by doing this. Like before we would make it in a braising pan, a tilt skillet, which is built like a big electric frying pan, and we would—and it was less. It was maybe five gallons of oil and 50 pounds [of flour], and then we'd just put it in there and turn it on kind of medium and then just someone with a wire whip would come stir it every few minutes. And we'd—that was

the color; we'd just do it by eye, the color we wanted it. And so we matched the color with the roux out of the roux machine. But then when we cooked the gumbo, the--the gumbo was thinner. The roux didn't thicken as much, and what I figured out was that when you're cooking in the braising pan, even, you know if you stir it every five minutes, you have some that's right against the heating element there and it gets very brown, and then you stir it up and it mixes--mixes with flour that's whiter, so you get this even color but it was a mixture of very dark brown flour and sort of light-colored flour that created this--this color. And in the roux machine it was constantly stirred, so that every grain theoretically was cooked exactly the same amount, which was, you know, lighter than what was against the elements of the braising pan but darker than the bulk of the flour in there. And the less—the more you cook flour the less it will thicken because it gets like encapsulated with—it's like deep-frying each flour grain, and so it wouldn't thicken as much because there wasn't that quantity of lesser-cooked flour in the same quantity of roux that looked the same color.

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SR: So let me just get this straight. It was the tilt skillet roux that thickened more.

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RS: Right, right, because what I imagine, it's just a mixture of the very—little bit of very brown flour and the greater quantity of less brown flour.

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SR: Yeah, and so were you disappointed? Did you then make a lighter roux so it would thicken more or—?

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RS: Right, right. That's when we started doing a lighter roux. Slightly lighter, yeah.

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SR: So that's really interesting. So it really depends on the apparatus you're using?

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RS: Right; that's why I don't think the temperature thing would work if you're doing it at home 'cause usually when you do it home, too, you're—you know it'll be about a quarter inch in the bottom of the pan and it cooks much faster, so I don't think--I don't think you'd get a good reading for one thing.

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SR: What about, do you have any opinions about the length of time that it takes you to get to a certain color and how, like, you could get a roux to a--you know, a really deep brown in 30 minutes by using really high heat, and if you were careful you wouldn't burn it; but you could also—you could get another roux to that same shade by stirring it for two hours. Did you learn anything about that?

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RS: No. [*Laughs*]

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SR: In your personal life, have you ever?

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RS: When I make roux at home, I make it in five minutes. I just do it real high and stir it constantly with the wire whip and have my veggies ready to throw into it right away. I never understood this standing there for hours doing it.

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SR: All right. So, okay, I need to go back to the steam kettle thing. So you used oil instead of steam because it would get hotter?

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RS: Right, right. So the oil would get to like 400 degrees or more, and that's the--what it takes to brown flour. You know, like deep-frying temperatures, 350 to 400 degrees. So that--we had to get it that high to brown the flour.

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SR: And what kind of oil do you use for the roux?

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RS: We use soy oil, soybean oil, yeah.

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SR: How come?

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RS: I don't know. [*Laughs*] It works.

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SR: Have you always?

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RS: At the restaurant I think we always have, yeah, yeah. At home I use olive oil.

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SR: And do you still use that machine that you invented?

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RS: Yes, the same machine. Yeah, in fact we have an extra kettle bowl that we have stored in case it ever breaks and we can just replace that with the same stirrer and everything, but we haven't had to.

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SR: So—

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RS: We use like a solid—not oil; in the jacket we use some kind of commercial Crisco-type product. We melt it and put it in ‘cause it’s very heat-durable, you know.

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SR: And what is your yield?

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RS: That doesn’t get in the food; that’s just the heating medium.

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SR: How much roux does does one batch make?

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RS: Well it would make roughly 250 pounds, something like that. We just pour it out into—we made this little trolley sort of thing that six-inch deep hotel pans can fit into ‘cause it’s so hot then. You don’t want to get near it. And we roll it in front of the machine and stay on the side and crank it with the—tilt kettle and fill each pan. We fill each pan and then just let it totally cool and then pour off the excess oil off the top and use it.

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SR: Has anybody ever gotten hurt?

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RS: No, fortunately. No, we're just very careful about it. I mean I've had some splash on me once when I was very young and that's why I'm so careful now. *[Laughs]*

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SR: It must smell delicious in there.

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RS: Yeah, it smells and it goes through these different stages too of smelling like—for a while it smells like a cake baking when you make that much 'cause it does take a long time in that roux machine. And then it starts to smell like popcorn, I find, and that's when you know it's really starting to brown. When I tell people, when I do little cooking demonstrations and tell people about making a roux, I always say just not the color; just watch the smell and watch the bubbling of the flour, the bubbling of the whole—of the liquid—because as soon as it stops bubbling, that means all the moisture is cooked out of the flour and that's when it really starts to brown quickly. And that's when it will start smelling like popcorn or roasted nuts or something like that. That's when you really have to watch it and keep stirring.

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SR: There's probably no real chance of burning the roux in that steam kettle huh?

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RS: No. Unless you left it on for three or four more hours, I guess you could. You probably could, yeah.

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SR: Well approximately how long does it take?

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RS: About four hours, so if you left it on overnight it might burn, but it would burn evenly.

[Laughs]

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SR: It's interesting because you could buy premade roux.

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RS: Yeah, I guess you could. See, well, people buy it from us.

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SR: Made up like that?

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RS: Yeah, yeah, uh-hm. And then we did a shelf-life study on that. I did my own shelf-life study first and then I sent it to a lab. I put a little quart of it or something and put it in this back storage

we had—you know unrefrigerated—and left it for like months, and then they brought it to the lab and it was totally inert. No bacteria or anything in it.

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SR: Huh. And what kinds of people buy it from you. Restaurants?

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RS: Yeah, and then food—couple of food processors. By food processors I mean just people who cook large batches of food, I guess you'd call it. *[Laughs]*

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SR: Like commercial gumbo makers or something?

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RS: Yeah. Not like big canning factories, but people who do frozen gumbo products and stuff that they sell to Sysco and places like that, or other restaurant chains.

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SR: And where is that facility that you built?

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RS: It's on South Front Street, which is parallel to Tchoupitoulas—between Tchoupitoulas and the river, and it's between State and Nashville.

00:32:00

SR: Are normal people are allowed to drive on that street?

00:32:03

RS: Uh-hm; uh-hm; uh-hm.

00:32:09

SR: Well that's fascinating. I'd love to see that.

00:32:11

RS: And people can come there and we also have our little catering office or catering counter there. People can buy a gallon of gumbo or a pan of jambalaya or something like that.

00:32:21

SR: Ordered ahead, or they can just walk in?

00:32:23

RS: It's better to order ahead, but you can just—but some things like gumbo and red beans and étouffée, you can just walk in. But if you want jambalaya we'd make it to order 'cause the way we do jambalaya for the Gumbo Shop is we'll cook a big 125-gallon batch and call it Jambalaya Mix, and it's all the seasonings and--and tomatoes and stuff like that. And at the restaurant they'll add the rice and shrimp and chicken and sausage.

00:32:54

SR: Can you tell me what kinds of gumbo you make at the restaurant?

00:32:59

RS: Yeah. On the regular menu there's a seafood okra gumbo and a chicken andouille gumbo and gumbo z'herbes, and then we rotate special gumbos and soups including smoked duck and oyster gumbo, turkey hot sausage gumbo, a filé gumbo with chicken and sausage which tastes totally different from the other ones. And what else do we do? Turtle soup, and there's one other gumbo—turtle soup, corn and crawfish chowder—.

00:33:52

SR: Maybe it'll come to you. Well can you tell me a little bit about gumbo z'herbes, what it is and what yours is like?

00:33:58

RS: Yes, gumbo z'herbes is traditionally a Lenten gumbo, eaten during Lent in this predominantly Catholic town, and it's a gumbo made of greens. It's supposed to be an odd number of greens—seven greens or nine greens. I guess it could be five greens too. Turnip greens, collard greens, mustard greens, cabbage, parsley you consider a green; I've heard of people that put dandelion greens in it or—all sorts of things. But we didn't serve that until—I don't know when I started, maybe eight years ago, and just did it as a little promotional thing during Lent. And it was--got to be popular enough that we kept it on the menu all year 'cause

there are not many vegetarian items on our menu. And ours is vegetarian. When you look at old cookbooks, they'll always throw like a ham bone in it, or--or sometimes sausage or something, and just—it seemed ridiculous to me that it was supposed to be this Lenten dish and--and it had meat in it. And so I wanted to make it without meat, and so I made it just without the meat and it just tasted like greens, you know. It wasn't very—tasted good but it didn't taste like--didn't taste like gumbo at all. And it was also very light, too; you really couldn't serve it as an entrée or anything—a big bowl. We do serve gumbo as an entrée at the Gumbo Shop. A lot of people get that.

00:35:23

So I—we have a smoker at our commissary, so I smoked some mushrooms, [*Laughs*] and I made a roux with olive oil for this—olive oil roux—and then added onions and bell peppers and celery, the traditional [seasonings], and then added these chopped-up smoked mushrooms at that point, and then added all the greens. And I didn't use--I didn't want to use any chicken stock or anything like that, so I just, you know the greens generated their own stock. So I added all the greens and cooked it, and it tasted very good. The smoked mushrooms gave it a lot of depth of flavor and a savory quality, but it was still a bit light as an entrée I thought, even served over rice. So then I added just some cooked red beans to it and—not a whole lot but some, so it just gave me a little more substantial—and just had it on that menu for Lent. And now we have--we have it on all year.

00:36:21

SR: So—

00:36:24

RS: And I remember telling—you may have been there at that--that Jazz Fest thing where I was sitting next to Leah Chase and told her about that and she just rolled her eyes. [*Laughs*]

00:36:36

SR: ‘Cause Leah Chase, I think, puts as many meats in her gumbo z’herbes as greens.

00:36:41

RS: Uh-huh. I think she puts like pork and ham and sausage and—. [*Laughs*] I’m sure it’s delicious but I wanted—I also just wanted to have something vegetarian.

00:36:53

SR: I think that’s good. It’s very difficult to send vegetarians somewhere to eat, especially in the Quarter. But in New Orleans in general it’s difficult.

00:36:59

RS: Right, right.

00:37:02

SR: On the economical end.

00:37:03

RS: Right, right. So yeah, so we have that and I also have a vegetarian dish of the day, which is usually beans, and it's usually either white beans or black-eyed peas or black beans, and all cooked you know very Creole-style. And what else do we have? And then we have a pasta with a smoked tomato and marinara that we'll do with shrimp if people want it. Or if they want strictly vegan we'll do it with that and that's tasty 'cause we smoke the tomatoes and then make the sauce.

00:37:35

SR: Yeah. For the gumbo z'herbes, do you use an odd number of greens?

00:37:41

RS: Uh-hm. I forgot how many but it's either five or seven. It depends on if you call a bell pepper a green [*Laughs*] and parsley, but yeah, it's legit that way.

00:37:58

SR: And you still use olive oil for the roux for that one?

00:38:00

RS: Yes, for that, yeah, yeah.

00:38:03

SR: So yeah, adding mushrooms and red beans to a gumbo is breaking some people's gumbo rules.

00:38:14

RS: Right.

00:38:16

SR: Do you have anything—I mean other than the gumbo z’herbes, which I know—

00:38:18

RS: Anything to say for myself?

00:38:21

SR: No, no, no. I understand why you did that, but with your other gumbos, the more traditional gumbos, do you have any pet peeves or any rules that you wouldn’t break?

00:38:35

RS: I don't break the—I’m sure you’ve heard this before, too—the okra and filé rule. I don't put okra and filé in the same gumbo.

00:38:42

SR: Never, huh?

00:38:43

RS: No, but all those gumbos we do are very different, too. I do roux and okra in--in a seafood gumbo and in a chicken gumbo, and—yeah, Tom Fitzmorris gives me a hard time about that.

Chicken gumbo should not have okra in it. But I grew up eating it like that [*Laughs*]. And then we do our turkey hot sausage--has roux, but not okra and no filé. The filé gumbo we do has filé and no roux or okra and we use a lot of filé and put it in with the sautéed seasoning vegetables at the beginning and then add the filé to the sautéed seasoning vegetables and mix it in like that, and then add the stock and--and chicken and sausage—and it's the chicken and smoked sausage for that—and it has a totally different flavor that way. It's still identifiable as gumbo. And then the smoked duck and oyster, we have roux but no okra or filé.

00:39:48

SR: Can you tell me for the record what filé is?

00:39:51

RS: It's ground sassafras leaves, ground dried sassafras leaves.

00:39:56

SR: And—

00:39:56

RS: They have a secret grove somewhere near Baton *Ru-age*, as Lionel Keyes says. [*Laughs*]

00:40:02

SR: Do you get your filé from him?

00:40:04

RS: No, we couldn't afford it. *[Laughs]* But we get it from one of the local—I think Rex, one of our local spice houses.

00:40:13

SR: And--and for the record, Lionel Keyes, who is another oral history subject, he grinds his own sassafras leaves.

00:40:20

RS: Yeah, in a stump with a baseball-bat-looking pestle. *[Laughs]*

00:40:25

SR: Yeah. And so I've--I've had your all-filé gumbo before and it was—you're right: it was so different from anything else, any other kind of gumbo I had ever tasted. Is it possible for you to describe it—what's different; I don't know, the sort of flavor?

00:40:45

RS: I mean you get the chicken background 'cause it has chicken stock in it, but it has a very herbaceous and almost—not in a bad way but almost—kind of grassy-tasting, and then a little tartness to it like a citrus-y kind of quality, I think.

00:41:07

SR: That sounds right to me. Had you ever—before you set out to create this for the restaurant, had you ever eaten anybody else’s filé gumbo that didn’t have roux or okra in it?

00:41:17

RS: I don't know. I’ve always—up until that I think I read that—it might have been something I read that Paul Prudhomme wrote about putting filé in the beginning or something, but other than that I always had filé added at the end, which I didn’t like. I didn’t like the quality of that. But I can't remember.

00:41:42

SR: I’m just wondering—so I had your filé gumbo at a school, Lusher, where you were serving kids. I think you brought four different kinds of gumbos and—four, was it?

00:41:55

RS: I think it was three.

00:41:56

SR: Three, okay.

00:41:57

RS: I think it was filé gumbo; I think it was a turkey hot sausage; I think seafood. Yeah, yeah.

00:42:05

SR: And one thing that I was totally fascinated to see was which students chose which kinds of gumbo and liked which kinds of gumbo best. I don't know what I was looking for. It's not like—there ended up being no stereotype, and I had no way of guessing. Do you find that certain kinds of New Orleanians prefer the all-filé or the—I don't know. Do you have anything to say about that? *[Laughs]*

00:42:39

RS: *[Laughs]* Filé is—to me, [it] is the most oddball of all the ones we make. I haven't done any profiling on that, but—I don't know. I mean seafood is our biggest seller. The--hmm—.

00:43:08

SR: I guess I'm wondering: Does a person's favorite style of gumbo say anything about that person?

00:43:15

RS: Hmm. I guess if they like the gumbo z'herbes that I make, I'd say they're an adventurous vegetarian. *[Laughs]* My son was telling me that—he worked for a while at Reginelli's [Pizzeria]. And there was a cook there who works for us at the Gumbo Shop also and he likes our turkey hot sausage gumbo and he's a black guy, and he said that's how—that's black gumbo, and it's made with a roux but no okra and no filé. And it's very—it's turkey and hot sausage and that's his favorite. Remember, Leah Chase at that same Jazz Fest thing, I was talking about my

mother's gumbo made with okra and no roux and lots of shrimp and lots of okra, and she just patted me on the leg [**Gestures**] and said, *Your mama was just making okra gumbo.* [**Laughs**]

00:44:12

SR: Like, *It's okay.*

00:44:15

RS: Right. [**Laughs**]

00:44:16

SR: You turned out all right anyway. But I mean I saw a couple of black kids at the school who related most to the filé gumbo.

00:44:26

RS: Yeah, that surprised me because that always seemed more Cajun to me.

00:44:30

SR: Oh, really?

00:44:32

RS: Uh-hm. I remember I had—one of our wine salespeople was from Cajun country, from way down in Cajun country, and had a heavy accent. And I remember one of the—when he was first calling on us at the Gumbo Shop he said, *Yeah, I can't believe I walked in here in the middle of*

the summer and see all these people eating gumbo. ‘Cause he was—growing up there he would only eat—I guess he was in the prairie area of Cajun country, where they did a lot of meat gumbos and they would only eat gumbo in the winter. And growing up here, we ate gumbo mainly in the summer because all that stuff was ripe in the summer.

00:45:04

SR: I’ve also heard New Orleanians say, *Oh, I don't eat gumbo in the summer.* And then I’ll ask, *Well what about shrimp and okra gumbo?* And they’ll say, *Oh yeah, well I eat that.*

00:45:15

RS: [*Laughs*] We also did have, after Thanksgiving we always had a big pot of turkey gumbo, but it usually was not with sausage for some reason.

00:45:26

SR: And so what was in it besides the turkey?

00:45:27

RS: Just a lot of turkey and okra. [*Laughs*]

00:45:31

SR: Yeah?

00:45:31

RS: My mother put okra in lots of things. *[Laughs]*

00:45:35

SR: But you don't have a--a gumbo at the Gumbo Shop that's like your mom's, huh, with the okra and no roux?

00:45:42

RS: No, no. It's another thing. It's not substantial enough, I find. You can eat like two or three bowls of it. It's almost like eating like a vegetable and shrimp stew in a way. It tastes like gumbo to me. I remember—I don't know if you were there several years back, that place called Culinaria. Do you remember that?

00:46:02

SR: Uh-hm.

00:45:59

RS: And there was a—I don't remember the reason for the function, but I was there serving some gumbo and I made the gumbo like my mother made for that and several people came by and said, *Oh yeah, that's how we ate gumbo growing up in New Orleans*. And Jessica Harris was there and she couldn't taste it 'cause she's allergic to shrimp and shellfish, yeah. But it was when she wrote that book *Beyond Gumbo*, yeah, and there were—I think in her book there was some gumbo similar to that. And I remember also reading a book, a Cuban cookbook; they had a dish

called quimbombo—q-u-i-m-b-o-m-b-o—I think, quimbombo, and it was similar to that, similar to like my mother’s gumbo without roux.

00:46:47

SR: Well—

00:46:49

RS: Like a stewed okra dish, yeah.

00:46:52

SR: Jessica Harris talks about that word in one of her books.

00:46:55

RS: Quimbombo, yeah. That’s—I think it’s Spanish—Cuban-Spanish for *okra*. I thought of something else. Hmm, it slipped away. *[Laughs]*

00:47:10

SR: It’s all right. So you said that the seafood gumbo is the most popular at the Gumbo Shop. So does the seafood gumbo—it has the shrimp in it; I’m guessing crabs. Does it have oysters?

00:47:24

RS: No, no; okra.

00:47:26

SR: And is that also the most popular gumbo through your catering operation?

00:47:34

RS: Yeah, pretty much. I mean at the restaurant probably 75-percent, or at times even more, of our guests are visitors to the city 'cause they want to try seafood gumbo. But you know local—our business Uptown is mostly locals. Like they'll come and get a bag of gumbo for dinner or something and it's still seafood, yeah.

00:47:56

SR: Okay. And so what about the trinity of seasoning vegetables? Do you use the same combination in all of your gumbos, and what would that be?

00:48:07

RS: The onion, celery, and bell pepper, yeah. I think we use it in most of them, probably in different proportions. I'd have to--have to look at the recipes [*Laughs*] 'cause it's all very programmed. Everything is weighed out and not measured, and I haven't cooked it myself in years. [*Laughs*]

00:48:33

SR: But you believe in all three of those personally?

00:48:37

RS: In most of them. I mean I probably put less bell pepper in the seafood, maybe, and I don't know that we use all three of them in everything but it's likely. I can check. I have the *Gumbo Shop Cookbook*. I can look at it if you'd like.

00:48:57

SR: That's okay. I was just more wondering about your philosophy because I've heard some people just absolutely will never add, or use, bell pepper. Or some people really don't like celery.

00:49:05

RS: Uh-hm. Yeah, I don't put bell pepper in as many seafood things—or as much bell pepper, and you know [I use] a lot of bell pepper in something like red beans or something, or--or maybe chicken and sausage gumbo or something. But I don't have any strict rules about that.

00:49:29

SR: And what about garlic?

00:49:30

RS: I don't have anything against it but I think it just gets lost in gumbo; you don't even know it's there. You can make it with it or without it and you probably couldn't tell the difference.

00:49:43

SR: I imagine that—well let me just ask you because I forgot to ask earlier. So the person who you're in business with now at the Gumbo Shop is that the same man who approached you many years ago?

00:49:54

RS: Yes, yes; uh-huh and he's the one who bought it from Margaret Papora, yeah, yeah.

00:50:01

SR: I imagine that because you own a place called the Gumbo Shop people probably ask you difficult questions like, *How do you define gumbo?* Do you have an answer for that?

00:50:15

RS: Right. I would mainly say you need a very flavorful stock and some sort of focused ingredient whether it be chicken or seafood or something like that, and seasoning vegetables—usually onions, celery, bell pepper; not necessarily celery and bell pepper. And it has to be—and it has to have high heat applied to it, like you have to brown—. If you're not making a roux you have to kind of brown the vegetables or something so it's got that depth of flavor and that, and the stock and the main ingredient, the meat or the seafood—. And then you have the okra or roux or filé or a combination of two of those except filé and okra. **[Laughs]** And that's—you know that's how I would attempt to define it.

00:51:16

SR: So it has to have one of those three?

00:51:20

RS: Yes.

00:51:22

SR: Unless it's gumbo z'herbes.

00:51:23

RS: Uh, that is roux.

00:51:24

SR: Oh okay.

00:51:24

RS: I think you're trying to catch me. [*Laughs*]

00:51:25

SR: No, no; I wasn't. I was just trying to think if there were—. It's really hard 'cause there's so many different kinds of gumbo and it's hard to narrow it down but that trinity of okra, roux or filé seems—one of them at least seems essential.

00:51:44

RS: Right, right, but you need all those other—I mean it’s not an eloquent explanation. But it’s a bunch of parts coming together and—.

00:51:54

SR: What about origins of gumbo? Do people ask you about that, and do you have anything to say about that?

00:51:59

RS: Well we talk about the word from--the African word for *okra* and then there’s another—and like if it’s a roux gumbo there’s a French influence of roux. And then the Native American *filé*, which I heard the word—I don’t know if it was folklore but the word was called *kombo*: k-o-m-b-o. It was a Choctaw Indian word for *filé*. But I don’t know how that all comes about, but I think it’s mainly the word comes from *okra*, the African word for *okra*, especially since you see that in the Caribbean too.

00:52:40

SR: So a lot of different influences.

00:52:43

RS: I’ve seen *okra* just being called--written somewhere and being called *gumbo*.

00:52:51

SR: What do you mean?

00:52:52

RS: Like in, I think maybe in like that old *Times-Picayune* cookbook? I think they sometimes refer to okra as gumbo.

00:53:02

SR: Yeah, I've seen that too. Before we run out of time I want to talk to you a little bit about your new line of cookbooks. I mean I know you have the *Gumbo Shop Cookbook*, but the *Joe Simmer* cookbooks.

00:53:19

RS: Right, those. I laugh every time someone asks me something serious about those.

00:53:23

SR: Really?

00:53:25

RS: Yeah the *Gumbo Shop Cookbook* I did, I think it was 1999, and it still—we've sold almost 50,000 of them. [*Laughs*] Yeah, it's done very well. And when I did that I hired a designer to design the book and we got to be friends and he designed books. He does a lot of stuff for the Historic New Orleans Collection and things like that. And we always kind of talked about doing a book together, you know a self-published book. And it was when I was evacuated for Hurricane Katrina. I was in Austin and I was driving back to New Orleans, and we had a

restaurant in Biloxi then which was totally washed away by Katrina. And I was on my way from Austin—like between [Hurricanes] Katrina and Rita—to New Orleans and then to Biloxi to see the ruins there, and I stopped and stayed the night at his house in Hammond. And we were just talking about doing this now and I was saying how—. Oh yeah, about 15 years ago, in the early ‘90s, I used to write a food column for *Offbeat Magazine* and I used the name Joe Simmer, ‘cause I thought it sounded kind of rock-n-roll, but food oriented also. And I remembered that name and I don't know why I thought about it—I guess because of the evacuation I thought about cooking in a Crock-Pot, and I had never in my life cooked in a Crock-Pot, ever. **[Laughs]** And when we were—Michael, my partner on that book, and I were meeting, we were having a martini and said **[Laughs]**—. You know I didn't know what was going to happen with New Orleans, with the restaurant and everything. And I said, *I'm not too proud to have a book called Joe Simmer's Creole Crock-Pot and convert all these recipes to the Crock-Pot*. We thought that was really funny and then we just started to go with it. And we had to change to *Joe Simmer's Slow Cooking* because Crock-Pot is a registered trademark name. But we started cooking some of the recipes and went out and bought different Crock-Pots and they worked great. I mean it was amazing at how well it worked for so many New Orleans foods. And so we did that; it was published, the first one—he did illustrations. No photographs and it's—and I wrote all these very comical and irreverent little stories for each recipe **[Laughs]** and made up things. But it was a hit and we printed 5,000 of them and sold them all in the first year, and we're in the second printing of that. And then we decided to take the same design and do more. Last year we did *Joe Simmer's Healthy Slow Cooking* ‘cause I do—even though I live in New Orleans I'm very health-oriented and eat a lot of healthy food which I think tastes just as delicious as unhealthy food. So we did just sort of a book of recipes that were just low or no saturated fat and high-fiber

and lots of vegetables and things like that. And that sold well, too. It sold enough to pay for itself, so—. And then just published is *Joe Simmer's All American Slow Cooking*, which is— what do we call it—*a sea-to-shining-sea culinary romp across the country*. **[Laughs]**

00:56:50

SR: I haven't seen that one yet.

00:56:51

RS: And that one is out; we're having our release party this Saturday at Garden District Books at 2 o'clock. And that one I've divided into—instead of chapters of like *Soups* and *Entrées* and things like that I divided it into chapters of American interests and values. There's a chapter on *History, Politics, Sports, Entertainment, and Money*. **[Laughs]** And each recipe somehow fits in there, so we'll be serving Saturday a Red-State Chili and a Blue-State Chili from the *Politics* chapter, and some Sofa Sunday Chicken Wings from the *Sports* chapter. **[Laughs]**

00:57:35

SR: You can make chicken wings in a Crock-Pot?

00:57:37

RS: Yeah, I was amazed, yeah. Some things you have to brown first, you know, and then you put them in there and leave them. But anyway they've been fun books to write. I think this might be the last one 'cause I'm just getting over it, but—. **[Laughs]**

00:57:53

SR: Well can you first of all—

00:57:54

RS: Oh there's one other one, and I wanted to bring this up. In the *Healthy Slow Cooking Book I* did something that Leah Chase would, like, have a stroke. **[Laughs]** But I made a posole gumbo; that's that hominy corn that's popular in the Southwest, and it was great. I made some posole—as some people say it. It's traditionally—well it looks like a chicken soup with this—. You soak the hominy and then boil it and the—traditionally like a chicken soup with cilantro in it and other seasonings and has a very Southwestern taste. And then I just made it with some okra. It's like stewed okra and posole. It's really good. It was like, kind of corn and okra works well together, but I won't tell Leah Chase about that one. **[Laughs]**

00:58:50

SR: She might not let you call it *gumbo* but she'll tell you that it tastes good if it does.

00:58:54

RS: Right.

00:58:56

SR: So Joe Simmer is sort of like your split personality?

00:59:01

RS: I guess since I'm writing all these things. I guess it must be some aspect of me. So it's fun; I really got—it was so much fun writing all this nonsense that—.

00:59:12

SR: You have a couple like Katrina recipes in there.

00:59:16

RS: In the Creole book I did a little post-Katrina section, and what are our recipes in there? I have a Chocolate City Chicken Molé, yes. And a Mexican roux for Pinto Beans and Rice.

[Laughs] And something else—there's a few other ones. Five Alarm Chili: that was one my son contributed. And Ninth Ward Turkey Necks, stewed turkey necks, which are great, and the Crock-Pot is wonderful for those.

00:59:53

SR: I need to explore. I've made the red beans quite a few times but—

00:59:56

RS: In the crock pot, uh-hm.

00:59:59

SR: In the Crock-Pot it works really well. So what do you have to do for a gumbo? How do you deal with the roux element?

01:00:04

RS: You make a roux first and then just dump everything in and then it cooks. Or for a seafood gumbo you might add the shrimp for the last half hour or something like that.

01:00:17

SR: And do you recall which gumbo recipes are in that book?

01:00:20

RS: A seafood gumbo and I don't know exactly the configuration of the seafood gumbo. It was a seafood gumbo and a chicken gumbo and a gumbo z'herbes in that one.

01:00:32

SR: What was the biggest challenge converting these recipes to slow cookers?

01:00:37

RS: Crock-Pots, just adjusting for the moisture and then the timing because you—it's closed up and it never really boils heavily. So you'd have to put a lot less liquid in it and then adjust for the—you'd have to experiment with the time 'cause you could end up with mush if you leave it too long. And I find the best way—it's great for beans, any kind of beans; it's a natural for that. But I find the best way to do beans is like to soak them overnight and then in the same water you're going to cook them in. I never understood the rinsing beans and throwing out the soaking water. **[Laughs]** But, so you measure the water you soak them in, and then while you're preparing your other ingredients, chopping up your seasoning, just put that pot on the stove and

bring it up to a boil and then pour it all into the pot—into the Crock-Pot. And what that does, is it shortens the cooking time and it makes it cook a little more evenly. It shortens it because it's already hot and the Crock-Pot takes a long time to heat up, especially if it's a large volume of liquid. So I've learned all kinds of little tricks about it like that. Even in the healthy book, I did poached salmon and it—I just put some wine and water and lemon and dill and some other seasonings in there and let it cook for a while. And then when you're ready to eat, just put the salmon in for 15 minutes and it's perfect. Yeah.

01:02:02

SR: Have you had anybody like press interested in this book that has been, not your normal audience—the healthy one?

01:02:18

RS: Oh, oh the healthy one. No that one—I mean that one didn't go over as well in New Orleans as the Creole [one].

01:02:25

SR: Well that's what I was wondering, if maybe people outside New Orleans picked that up.

01:02:28

RS: Our plan now with the *All American*—now we have three. See, we're self-published, and I'm not—I guess you know about the book industry. It's like a book mafia almost. A few people control the whole distribution, but there are some people that specialize in representing

independent publishers and they might not do it if you just write one book, but now that we have three they'll take us more seriously and we're going to start working on national distribution.

01:02:54

SR: Before we get off the subject of beans, I just wanted to ask you a little question that I've been wondering about recently. Is there a difference between a New Orleans red bean and a kidney bean?

01:03:08

RS: No, the red kidney beans are the New Orleans red beans. And there are smaller red beans that can be lighter--can be a little bit lighter red, but they have more of a texture of a pinto bean I find. And I always used red kidney beans. And it's interesting: almost all the red kidney beans in the US are grown in either Michigan or Colorado. And I don't know why it became such a big deal here.

01:03:35

SR: Huh.

01:03:35

RS: And I think New York also. I say Michigan—it might be—oh you're from there—.

01:03:42

SR: No, I'm from Wisconsin.

01:03:44

RS: [*Laughs*] That's what I was driving at—I got those States mixed up.

01:03:49

SR: Yeah, and Minnesota.

01:03:51

RS: And Minnesota—one of those. No, I think it's Michigan.

01:03:55

SR: But when you say red kidney bean versus what? Is there another kind of kidney bean?

01:04:02

RS: Well I think Great Northern white beans are a kidney bean too—I think.

01:04:12

SR: And are the red beans that you use today the same that you remember as growing up?

01:04:16

RS: Camellia brand, yeah of course—yeah, yeah. That's one of the early things I cooked as a child, was the recipe on the back of the bag. [*Laughs*]

01:04:25

SR: Really? So it sounds like your son is a cook.

01:04:31

RS: Yeah, he likes and enjoys cooking. He doesn't cook professionally and he doesn't want to. He wants to keep it as a hobby but he does very well—all sorts of things. He cooks Thai and Vietnamese and wild animals and all sorts of things.

01:04:54

SR: And you have a daughter as well. Is that right?

01:04:56

RS: Yes, yes, and she's not as much of a cook. She's starting to be a little bit. She likes to bake things and she'll go through phases of—I remember she went through a scone phase. *[Laughs]*

01:05:12

SR: Really?

01:05:14

RS: And they get that from me 'cause I've always gone through phases of cooking different things, and I went through a big Indian phase, cooking Indian food, which I still like.

01:05:25

SR: But she's not in the profession?

01:05:27

RS: No, she's a graphic artist and my son is a real estate agent.

01:05:32

SR: So no one in the family—is anyone else in your family in the food industry?

01:05:39

RS: Nope.

01:05:42

SR: I wanted to ask: you mentioned earlier that when you were evacuated for Katrina, that's when you started thinking about slow cookers a little bit more. Do you feel like New Orleanians responded to your first book at least because of the same reason?

01:05:58

RS: Because of Katrina?

01:05:59

SR: Yeah, that people were without kitchens?

01:06:04

RS: Yeah, I think to some extent, and they just liked it. I got a very nice write-up in the *Times-Picayune*, and that helps—with pictures. **[Laughs]** But it was—a lot of people just really liked it.

01:06:17

SR: Um—

01:06:19

RS: More people use Crock-Pots than I imagine too.

01:06:22

SR: Really?

01:06:24

RS: Yeah, that was a shock, that some people—*Oh, I love a Crock-Pot*. I was like, *You?*

[Laughs]

01:06:30

SR: Well what is it about Crock-Pots that we love?

01:06:32

RS: I guess just the convenience of them, and they are convenient. I'll use—sometimes now when I—like, I cook beans fairly often, all kinds of different beans, but I'll use it like a lot of

times for beans just because of the convenience. Even if I'm going to be home, just so I don't have to look at it; you know, fool—or don't have to tend it.

01:06:56

SR: There's also something—I mean I sort of scoffed at the Crock-Pots, but my husband forced us to buy one and there's something just novel about it even if you do have the time to stir something over the stove. It's sort of fun just to watch this thing just putter.

01:07:12

RS: Oh just watch the Crock-Pot? Yeah. **[Laughs]** I did last year—and we have to do another one this year—at the St. Tammany Parish Library. They do these little educational programs and they have guests come in and things like that. And we did a cooking demonstration with a Crock-Pot, and so we just kind of had all the ingredients, you know, **[Laughs]** and showed them how to put it together and then had some cooked. But one dish—it was for the Creole, and I cooked a jambalaya which you can do. That was kind of a stretch, but you have to use like parboiled rice, converted rice, because it just gets too starchy in there cooking that long. And so I had it timed to where once you add the rice it's about two hours and it comes out just perfectly cooked. But we finished a little bit early and I couldn't make it cook fast enough. And I was thinking—so then my partner in the deal, Michael, just started reading stories out of the book, -which worked. But I thought of, when we do that again I want to get a clock with a little motor on the back so we can make the hands turn fast and use that in our demonstrations and then pull out the finished [product]. **[Laughs]**

01:08:27

SR: Simulate the passing of time?

01:08:30

RS: Right.

01:08:31

SR: Well do you often go into school classrooms, like I saw—where I saw you at Lusher?

01:08:37

RS: I've done that a couple of times for Michael Depp there at Lusher, and I think I've done it—yeah, at one time I did one at Covenant House, the kids staying there. I've done a few things like that and I've done some demos at the Crescent City Farmers Market and for the French Quarter Festival. I've been on their Board for years and I do the Christmas—when they do the Christmas New Orleans-Style events. One of the things, they had cooking demonstrations for people; I've done that.

01:09:13

SR: What do you think about the level of interest in the native cuisine among New Orleanian children?

01:09:24

RS: I see it—my kids find it very interesting, yeah. I recently got a new copy of that old *Picayune* cookbook, and my son was fascinated with it. And yeah, I think it just goes on and on here. I mean I'm kind of amazed sometimes about this constant interest in food in general in New Orleans. **[Laughs]** I've read some of your—I haven't read your whole book but I read a third of it, and it's interesting seeing it from an outside perspective. You're not from here and I especially like the chapter on Creole Italian, because I think it's not recognized enough in New Orleans. And I'm so happy to see you did that and it was--it was an accurate perspective on it.

01:10:14

SR: Do you have a red gravy recipe?

01:10:16

RS: I do, and that works very well in the Crock-Pot. And I got my red gravy recipe—I had to adjust it for the crock, but—from a woman; her name is Leigh Segal, and she is—her maiden name was Italian and she lives in a house on Bourbon Street in the French Quarter, lower French Quarter, and she's in her 70s I guess. And her father bought the house when he came here from Sicily in 1905 and she still lives in the same house. And she has a very good red gravy. **[Laughs]**

01:10:47

SR: And without a roux I'm guessing.

01:10:49

RS: Yeah, without a roux—just olive oil, lots and lots of finely chopped onions, and she uses tomato purée when she said she makes her good red gravy, and when she makes a quick one she uses tomato paste and water. But the key is a lot of onions and just cooking forever, yeah.

01:11:10

SR: I'll have to try that. It's getting late. I have one final question for you that might lead to a couple others but maybe not. We're lucky that we can feel a little autumn in the air this week.

01:11:26

RS: Yeah.

01:11:26

SR: And it's made—I've actually eaten gumbo a couple times in the past few days. If you were to cook a gumbo at home tonight, what would it be, like what kind of gumbo do you cook for yourself when you have a hankering—or for your family?

01:11:42

RS: I would cook an okra-heavy gumbo, probably without a roux [*Laughs*] 'cause sometimes the roux is just a little too heavy for me to eat. But probably something like that with—in fact several times this summer I would go to the green market and get some of Monica's pre-cut okra, fresh okra, and get shrimp and get tomatoes all right there and cook it probably a little thicker than you would think—not as much liquid in it—and that's probably my favorite still, which was my original.

01:12:22

SR: Go back to your roots.

01:12:23

RS: Right.

01:12:23

SR: And then you'd eat that over rice?

01:12:27

RS: Right, but sometimes I would do—this would be a variation of that. I always do that, and as—I forgot his name at the market; he's from Mississippi, and he sells grass-fed beef and—

01:12:38

SR: Justin?

01:12:38

RS: Justin, yeah, and he has a sausage he makes too. Yeah, and I'll do that: shrimp, okra, tomatoes, and sausage—okra, yeah, yeah.

01:12:50

SR: It's sort of strikes me—. Yeah, I think Justin's sausage is really good.

01:12:56

RS: Oh and then you were talking about bell peppers. Like when I make that at home, I probably wouldn't put bell pepper in that and not celery either. It would be just onion for that. The celery seems too close to okra in texture and shape and all that. Oh, and then the other thing—one thing, a great thing I found out about the Crock-Pot is okra: it does a great job with okra because it totally cooks it; there's no ropiness at all to it anymore but it keeps its shape. But if you cook it on top of the stove and stir it a lot it kind of gets beat up and the little pinwheels kind of get damaged. **[Laughs]** But yeah, there's a recipe in the Creole cookbook for—it's a shrimp and okra and it has some bacon in it, I think. And it's excellent. I was amazed at how good it was and you can use fresh or frozen; it comes out great.

01:13:47

SR: It's dinnertime; this is sort of painful. **[Laughs]** One thing I'll ask you: you know it strikes me that I think okra and corn really do go well together.

01:13:57

RS: Yeah.

01:13:59

SR: And corn comes in season around the same time as okra and tomatoes, but corn is not an acceptable gumbo ingredient, is it?

01:14:10

RS: No, no, it's not. [*Laughs*]

01:14:15

SR: You've never done that other than the—?

01:14:18

RS: No, I don't think I would either. It doesn't sound right. As they'd say in New Orleans, *That ain't right*. [*Laughs*] But I think in Joe Simmer's first book, too, is a Creole succotash, which is tomatoes and okra and corn—very good.

01:14:36

SR: So, Joe Simmer, you speak of *Joe* Simmer as if he's another person.

01:14:41

RS: Right, in the third person [*Laughs*].

01:14:46

SR: Well thank you, Richard, for giving us your time. I appreciate it.

01:14:49

RS: Thank you. This was fun.

01:14:52

[End Richard Stewart Interview]